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SUBJECT: CARDINAL RODRIGUEZ CELEBRATES 25 YEARS OF SERVICE;
DELIVERS SPEECH CRITICAL OF FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS

1. On December 8, Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez celebrated 25 years as a bishop (he has 33 years total in the priesthood). For his service, the Government of Honduras awarded him the "Great Extraordinary Cross", considered to be the highest award given by the GOH. At two separate ceremonies, attended by high-level GOH officials, prominent businessmen and members of civil society, the Cardinal used the opportunity to promote his social and political philosophy. Considered a strong candidate for the papacy, Cardinal Rodriguez possesses great clout in Honduras, and adroitly used his anniversary to address Honduran society on a wide scope of issues facing both the country and the world.

2. The controversial issue of globalization provided the framework for the Cardinal's main speech before the National Congress, which touched on topics such as the socioeconomic disparity among classes and social marginalization. For the most part, his speech covered macro issues confronting the world, and rarely did he choose to address the specific concerns of Honduras. However, on two such occasions, the Cardinal took ideological jabs at both the GOH and the United States. The Cardinal expressed that he would like to see the National Congress grant explicit authority to the Supreme Court to interpret the Honduran Constitution, a past political hot potato. He also more fervently attacked the FTAA and CAFTA, explicitly calling on the Congress to delay consideration of the agreement. According to statistics presented by Cardinal Rodriguez, United States farm subsidies would cause 500,000 Hondurans employed in the agricultural sector to lose their jobs under CAFTA. This, in effect, would cause a wave of migration to the cities, placing additional strain on public services and leading to higher levels of crime, he claimed. Cardinal Rodriguez said he would like to see these free trade agreements postponed until the agricultural industry becomes more efficient and the United States changes its policy on farm subsidies.

3. COMMENT: Cardinal Rodriguez, who has three PhDs and speaks eight languages, possesses a great philosophical acumen that often times strays from the pragmatic realities of society. By nature of his position as the leader of the Catholic Church in Honduras, he appears to view the world as what it can become. It is therefore evident in his public appearances that he is not an incrementalist and can at times vigorously advocate for the causes of social justice and economic equality. As such, the reach of his political philosophy often exceeds the ability of Honduran society to grasp it. END COMMENT.
Palmer